

# Blessed Persecution

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, if we could, for a short while this evening, if we could turn back to that portion of Scripture that we read, Matthew's Gospel, Matthew chapter 5. Matthew chapter 5.

And if we read again at verse 10. Matthew chapter 5 at verse 10. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you, and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Tertullian is one of our more well-known early church fathers. He was one of the second century church fathers. He lived in what was called Carthage.

[ 1 : 20 ] It was a Roman province of Africa. And Tertullian, he was one of the early Christian apologists who defended the Christian faith as it spread throughout the powerful yet pagan Roman Empire.

In fact, Tertullian, he wrote a defense of Christianity. He entitled it Apologeticus, which means simply a defense. And Tertullian, he presented it to the Roman Empire for consideration.

And in it, Tertullian, he criticized and condemned the Roman Empire for the way in which it persecuted Christians. And Tertullian, he called upon the Roman Empire to be more tolerant of Christians and to treat them fairly, like all the other members of society within the Roman Empire. And Tertullian, he memorably concluded his defense of Christianity by saying that Christians take no pleasure in being persecuted and enduring trials.

But as soldiers of Christ, they too must fight for the truth and for the glory of God. And Tertullian, he went on to say, crucify us, torture us, condemn us, destroy us.

[ 2 : 38 ] Do what you will. Your injustice is the proof of our innocence. When we are condemned by you, we are acquitted by God.

And with that, Tertullian, he warned the Roman Empire that if they continue persecuting Christians and seek to eradicate Christianity altogether, he said the Roman Empire will eventually collapse. Because as Tertullian famously said, the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church. The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.

And as you know, Tertullian was right. Because as the Roman Empire, as they persisted into the 3rd century and the 4th century, persecuting the church, it eventually collapsed.

And as Jesus said, I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. My friend, the church was blessed through persecution.

[ 3 : 44 ] The church was blessed through persecution. And that's what we're considering this evening as we look at the final beatitude in the Sermon on the Mount.

Because this beatitude, it is a double beatitude. It's a double blessing of blessed persecution. It's a double blessing of blessed persecution.

And I'd like us just to consider this double beatitude under two headings. The gift of persecution and the guarantee of persecution.

The gift of persecution and the guarantee of persecution. So first of all, the gift of persecution.

Where Jesus says, Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake.

For theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you.

And utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

[ 4 : 46 ] Now, as you know by now, Jesus, He introduces His Sermon on the Mount with these nine beatitudes. They're nine statements of blessing. Or nine benedictions of blessedness.

And they appear as the introduction to the Sermon on the Mount because Jesus seeks to teach us what it means to be a Christian. And what it means to be a citizen of the kingdom of heaven. A child of our heavenly Father.

And a disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ. Because as sinners, as sinners who have submitted and surrendered their life under the lordship of Jesus and under the authority of Christ, as sinners who have come to this wonderful Savior, we have received what we do not deserve.

We are, as Jesus says, we are blessed. We are a blessed people. And as we said throughout our study, the word blessed, it literally means to kneel. We're kneeling in submission and surrender to King Jesus.

We're coming before Him on our knees with our head bowed and our hand outstretched. And we are receiving from His hand gracious gifts of blessedness.

[ 5 : 58 ] And as Paul reminds us, we have received not just the first blessing or the second blessing. We have received every spiritual blessing in heavenly places in Christ.

But as you know, being blessed, it doesn't just add something to what we already have. No, as you know from your own experience, the gospel empties us of all that we are in order to fill us and bless us with all that Jesus is.

And as we've considered these beatitudes over the past number of weeks, we've discovered that in Christ, we have received blessed poverty, blessed mourning, blessed meekness, blessed righteousness, blessed mercy, blessed purity, blessed peace.

And this evening, we're looking at blessed persecution. Blessed persecution. Now, as we said, this final beatitude is a double beatitude. It's a double blessing of blessed persecution.

It's a double blessing of blessed persecution. Which immediately raises the question, in my mind anyway, I'm sure it raises the question in your mind too, how is persecution a gift?

[ 7 : 17 ] How is persecution a blessing? That's what Jesus says, blessed are those who are persecuted. For righteousness sake.

So how is persecution a gift? How is persecution a blessing? Because when we think of persecution, we see it as an obstacle to the gospel. But Jesus says here, that persecution is an opportunity for the gospel.

In fact, when we actually consider the words of Jesus and the history of the church, we see that persecution was a blessing. And that persecution was a gift and still is in some way a gift to the church.

Because if it wasn't for persecution, the gospel wouldn't have spread the way it did throughout the early church and in throughout the following centuries.

As Tertullian asserted and affirmed, the blood of the martyrs was the seed of the church. And this was something Jesus pledged and promised to all his disciples only hours before his own arrest, his own persecution, his own arrest and crucifixion.

[ 8 : 32 ] You remember in John 15, where Jesus said to his disciples, they just left the upper room and Jesus says to them, if the world hates you, know that it hated me before it ever hated you.

If you were off the world, he says, the world would love you as its own. But because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.

If they have persecuted me, says Jesus, they will persecute you. And the world did hate and the world did persecute Jesus. And in many ways, it still does.

But you know, Jesus, he teaches us, doesn't he? He teaches us by his own exhortation and by his own example that we are to love our persecutor.

Jesus exhorts us even later on in the Sermon on the Mount. He says, love your enemies. Bless those who curse you. Do good to them that hate you.

[ 9 : 33 ] And pray for them which despitefully use you and persecute you. And we always stop at those words and think, how do we do that?

How do you love your enemies? And yet Jesus, he exhorts us to love our persecutors. But he also not only exhorts us, he gives us an example. He gives us an example when he prayed for his persecutors when hanging on the cross.

The first words Jesus said on the cross, Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do. And Jesus, he's saying here in the Sermon on the Mount that persecution is a blessing.

Persecution is a gift to the church. And we see that even when we read the history of the early church, even in the book of Acts. We see that the church had sprouted and it spread through the

gift of persecution.

It was a blessing to the church. Because you remember at the ascension of Jesus, the disciples, they were all commissioned to be witnesses for Jesus. They were to spread the gospel.

[10:41] Jesus says, you're to be my witnesses from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria to the uttermost parts of the earth. Now at first, when the disciples were given that commission, they didn't know how they were going to do it.

They didn't know how they were going to go from Jerusalem to Judea to the uttermost parts of the earth. But when the Lord brought persecution, the Lord, you could say, blessed the church with persecution.

And the church scattered. And the gospel began to spread. And it spread, as you read through the book of Acts, it spreads from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria.

And by the time you reach the end of the book of Acts, it is going to the uttermost parts of the earth. Paul is on his way to Rome. And it's going to the uttermost parts of the earth.

And this spreading, this scattering of Christians throughout the Roman Empire, it's referred to as the diaspora or the dispersion. And that's why all our New Testament letters, they're all written to places outside of Jerusalem.

[11:46] It was all because of this diaspora, this dispersion, where Christians were dispersed and displaced because they were being persecuted for their faith in Jesus Christ.

And you know, one book I find fascinating, and yet I find it frightening to read as well, is the book, Fox's Book of Martyrs. And you might have it, you might have read it before.

Fox's Book of Martyrs, it was written by the 16th century English historian, John Fox, where he gives a historical account of many of the Christians who were persecuted and martyred from the time of the early church in the first century, right up through until the Reformation in the 16th century.

In fact, John Fox, he claimed that the first martyr in the New Testament church was John the Baptist because he was beheaded by King Herod for preaching the gospel.

Then he says there was Stephen. After Jesus, there was Stephen who was, as you know, stoned to death. Then 10 years after the death of Stephen, there was the Apostle James who was beheaded.

[12:59] Then Philip was scourged, thrown into prison, and eventually crucified. Matthew, he says, was killed with an axe. Andrew, the brother of Peter, he was crucified on a cross in the shape of the Scotland flag, apparently.

That's why we have the St. Andrew's cross. Peter was crucified upside down. Bartholomew was beaten and crucified. Thomas was thrust through with a spear. Simon, the zealot, he was also crucified.

Matthias, who was the new addition to the apostles, he was stoned to death and then beheaded. Mark, the gospel writer, he was tied to a horse and dragged through the streets until there was nothing left of him.

Luke, the other gospel writer, he was hanged. James, who wrote the letter of James, he was stoned to death. All the apostles, we're told, were martyred, except John, who died as an old man on the Isle of Patmos.

The history of the church, says John Fox, is a history of the trials and sufferings of its members. The history of the church is a history of the trials and sufferings of its members.

[14:13] And that's certainly true because when we consider the history of the church of Jesus Christ, when we consider the history from the early church to the medieval church to the Reformation to the Puritans to the Covenanters down throughout the centuries right to the present day, and you look at it all and you see that there have been countless millions who have been persecuted and died a martyr's death.

Some by being burnt or beaten, others by being scalded, stoned or stabbed, clubbed and even crucified. And you know, it's estimated that in the 21st century, in our day, one in nine Christians in the world are being persecuted for their faith.

One in nine. Which works out at over 245 million. 245 million Christians with North Korea being the most dangerous place in the world to be a Christian.

And you know, that's why it's so important to prayerfully and practically support charities which help persecuted Christians.

Charities like Steadfast Global and Open Doors, how they encourage and support those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake. My friend, persecution is real.

[ 15 : 41 ] But Jesus says here persecution is a blessing. And I'm still trying to get my head around that. It's a gift to the church. But as Tertullian said, the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.

The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church. But I want us to consider secondly the guarantee of persecution. So the gift, as Jesus says, the gift of persecution and then the guarantee of persecution.

The guarantee of persecution. We'll read our text again. Jesus says, blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. You know, when we consider the history of the church, we shouldn't be surprised by persecution.

We shouldn't be surprised because, as Jesus said, if anyone will come after me, if anyone will come after me, Jesus said, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.

[ 17 : 00 ] Now, as you know, when Jesus said those words, he wasn't talking about putting on a cross like a necklace. Taking up your cross was literally going to die.

That's what it meant in the first century to say that. So, it shouldn't surprise us that persecution has been part of the church since its very birth.

Because the call of discipleship is a call to cross-bearing Christianity. Christianity. It's a call to committed Christianity.

But, you know, we look at our own day and age in the West, and instead of committed Christianity, we sadly have a comfortable Christianity. Where, as long as I can privately live my life as a Christian, and no one speaks to me, or asks me to speak, or say something, or share my faith in any way, as long as I don't have to do anything that will take me out of my comfort zone, then I'm happy to be a Christian.

Just let me come to church, let me sit at home, if you're at home tonight, and enjoy my comfortable Christianity. But, you know, what seems to have happened with our comfortable Christianity is that it has become a consumerist Christianity.

[ 18 : 19 ] And I'm not just speaking about ourselves as a congregation, as it's, this is a general trend in Christianity in the West today. It's become a consumerist Christianity, where we only come to church to get and not to give, to receive, but not to respond, to store up, but not to speak up, or to stand up, and to share our faith.

But then there's the danger of our comfortable, consumerist Christianity becoming a cafeteria Christianity. Christianity, where we pick and choose the bits of the Bible we like, or the preachers we like, or the style of worship we like, and we leave the rest on the shelf.

But, you know, my friend, I need not remind you that a comfortable, consumerist, cafeteria Christianity, that's not the call of discipleship. That's not what it means to deny self, take up your cross, and follow Jesus.

That's not a cross-bearing Christianity. It's not a committed Christianity. Maybe I'd go as far as to say it's not Christianity at all. But, you know, this is what Jesus warns us about.

And Jesus warned us about this in my favorite parable, the parable of the sower. Do you remember the parable of the sower where the seed that fell on the rocky ground?

[ 19 : 45 ] And Jesus describes the rocky ground. And he describes it and says, that's the shallow Christian. That's the comfortable, consumerist, cafeteria Christian.

Because the seed of God's Word, which fell on shallow ground, it has no depth, and no root, and no earth. And Jesus says, all that grew upwards, it withers so quickly because it didn't grow downward. My friend, Jesus warned us about being shallow saints, about being comfortable, and consumerist, and cafeteria Christians. Because Jesus says in the parable of the sower that they receive the seed of God's Word, they rejoice for a time, but they have no root.

And when tribulation, or, he says, persecution arises, on account of the Word, they immediately fall away.

It's so challenging, isn't it? So challenging. And you know, this is why Jesus reminds us and reassures us that as Christians, as citizens of the kingdom, he says here in the Beatitudes, as children of our Heavenly Father, as disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ, we're given this double

beatitude, this double blessing of blessed persecution.

[ 21 : 10 ] And we're given it because Jesus says persecution is guaranteed. Persecution is guaranteed. In fact, Jesus, he expands and explains here that persecution is all because of righteousness' sake.

And it's all on account of following him. Persecution, says Jesus, it isn't personal per se. Persecution is because we possess, practice, and pursue righteousness.

Persecution isn't personal. Persecution is because we possess, and practice, and pursue righteousness. We are persecuted for righteousness' sake.

As Christians, persecution is because we have been declared and we demonstrate righteousness. Now, of course, I don't think we should seek persecution. But at the same time, we shouldn't be surprised by it.

Don't be surprised that the world hates you, said John, the apostle. Don't be surprised that the world hates you. Instead, we should consider the times, and I'm sure we've all had it in our experience, times where we were maybe slandered or smeared, insulted or ignored, defamed or disparaged, mocked or maligned for the sake of Christ, for righteousness' sake.

[ 22 : 39 ] And, you know, when these times happen, we should see, well, we're in good company. It happened to Jesus. It happened to the prophets, as Jesus says.

It happened to the church, the early church, and the church throughout the centuries. And so, whether our persecution is verbal or vicious or violent, we should consider persecution, dare I say, a privilege.

We should consider persecution a privilege. You know, that's how the martyrs throughout church history saw it. They considered persecution a privilege.

Now, I'm still trying to get my head around this myself. You know, whether it was Polycarp who was boiled in tar, or John Huss or John Wycliffe who were burned at the stake, or William Tyndale who was choked to death, there was George Wishart who was hanged in St. Andrews, or even the Solway sisters who were drowned, they considered persecution a privilege.

They considered it a double beatitude, as Jesus presents it here. They considered it a double blessing, not only to know Christ, but to die for knowing Christ.

[ 24 : 02 ] They considered it a double blessing, the double blessing of blessed persecution. A double blessing of blessed persecution.

And you know, my friend, and with this, I'll close. You know, when you read the accounts of the Lord's people throughout the history of the church, when you read Fox's Book of Martyrs, or you read different stories of those who were persecuted throughout the centuries of the church, I don't know about you, but I often think to myself, how could they ever consider persecution as a privilege?

How could they ever consider persecution as a privilege? And even today, you hear stories of those who are persecuted and they consider it a privilege to suffer for the sake of Christ.

But how do they consider it a privilege? Because I'm not sure I would. But then you read what Paul wrote in Romans 8. Paul, as you know, was once a persecutor of righteousness who was converted and he himself was then persecuted for righteousness' sake.

But from experience, Paul could say in Romans 8, who shall separate us from the love of Christ?

This is a man who was undergoing persecution and he says, who shall separate us from the love of Christ?

[ 25 : 38 ] Shall tribulation? No. Distress? No. Persecution? No. Famine? No.

Nakedness? No. Danger? No. The sword? No. As it is written, he says, in Psalm 44, that's what he quotes in Romans 8, which we'll sing in a moment.

Psalm 44, for your sake we are being killed all the day long. We are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered. In other words, Paul actually says persecution is a gift and a guarantee.

It's a blessing, he says. Paul considered it a blessing. He talks about that in Corinthians. All that he went through and he says, his grace was sufficient for me. But he says here in Romans 8, in all these things, we are more than conquerors through him that loved us.

Why? For I am persuaded that neither death nor life nor angels nor principalities nor powers nor things present nor things to come neither height nor depth nor any other creature is able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

[ 27 : 01 ] My friend, Paul considered persecution a double blessing. He considered it a gift and a guarantee.

And that's what Jesus is reminding us this evening in this beatitude. It's a double beatitude where we see the gift of persecution and the guarantee of persecution.

It's a double blessing of blessed persecution. A double blessing of blessed persecution. Where Jesus says, blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake.

For theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

Rejoice and be glad for your reward is great in heaven. For so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. Well, may the Lord bless these thoughts to us.

[ 28 : 05 ] Let us pray together. O Lord, our gracious God, we give thanks to thee for thy word. Thy word that is so challenging.

Thy word that reminds us that we are to take up our cross daily and to follow Jesus. And Lord, we do not know where that will lead us or what that will bring into our experience.

But help us like the apostle of old to keep our eyes firmly fixed upon Jesus. For he is the author and he remains the finisher of our faith.

Lord, remember those tonight who are persecuted for righteousness' sake. Those who are undergoing the extremest of circumstances because they love Jesus.

We give thanks to thee for the peace that we enjoy. We give thanks, Lord, that we are able to meet without fear of any man breaking in. But Lord, we do pray that we wouldn't become too comfortable, that we would be committed in our commitment to Jesus, that we would keep loving him and looking to him and listening to him and walking with him day by day, knowing that his promises are sure.

[ 29 : 25 ] They are all yea and amen in Christ. Lord, bless us then, we pray. Bless thy church, Lord, that thou wouldest continue to build it up, that as the psalmist says, except the Lord do build the house.

The builders lose their pain, except the Lord the city keep, the watchmen watch in vain. Do us good then, Lord, we pray. Go before us for Jesus' sake.

Amen. Well, we're going to bring this time to a conclusion by singing in Psalm 44.

Psalm 44. Psalm 44. As we mentioned, it's quoted in Romans chapter 8. Psalm 44. It's in the Scottish Psalter.

We're singing from verse 20 down to the end of the psalm. After we sing this psalm, as usual, the live stream will come to an end.

[ 30 : 28 ] So those who are watching online, it'll come to an end. But just to highlight the prayer points for those who are watching at home, not to move away, but to take time to pray, to pray with us as we pray together.

Just to hand out a few things to you for prayer. Pray for, as you mentioned, the Matheson family. Give thanks to the Lord for Katie and the treatment she's received and the benefit it has been to her.

Pray for others, though, who are sick in our congregation. As you know, there are many sick and those suffering and others who are sorrowing. They are always with us.

Remember also the congregations of Pull U and Alt Bay. That's the congregations we're encouraged to pray for. That's one charge, Pull U and Alt Bay. The minister there is the Reverend Dan Patterson.

He was a year above me in college. He's a great guy. So pray for the congregation there and also pray for the congregation of Greenock. Pray for them, a small, vacant congregation and pray that they would know the Lord's blessing and the Lord's help.

[ 31 : 34 ] Pray also, as we mentioned, for Steadfast Global, for Open Doors UK, those who encourage and support those who are persecuted. Pray for all these bills that seem to be going through parliaments, the assisted suicide, conversion therapy.

It's another email I received yesterday. Pray for all these different situations and circumstances that the Lord would overrule. He would rule over and overrule in all these things.

Pray for our governments. Pray for our counselors that we would have, that they would have the wisdom of God. So just a few things to highlight to you.

We're going to sing Psalm 44 from verse 20. And verse 22 is the quote from Romans 8. If we God's name forgot, or stretched to a strange God our hands, shall not God search this out, for he heart's secrets understands.

If for thy sake we're killed all day, counted as slaughter sheep, rise, Lord, cast us not ever off, awake, why dost thou sleep?

[ 32 : 47 ] We'll sing on to the end of the psalm of Psalm 44 to God's praise. If we God's name forgot, are straight, do and paint God our hands, shall not shall not concede this out, for he our secrets understands.

yea, for my sake were killed all day, and did as slaughter sheep, rise, Lord, cast us not ever off, awake, why dost thou see?

O, wherefore for hidest thou thy face, forgetst thou cause' distress, and our oppression for our soul, is to the dust of rest, our belly also on the earth, but sleeping hold of day, rise for our health, and us redeem, give forth thy mercy save.

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